

Diversity and Multiplicity of themes in Don DeLillo's Fiction: Expressing Contemporariness

Dr. Gurpreet Kaur

Asst. Prof. Comm. Skills

Dept of English

Shri Guru Granth Sahib World University,

Fatehgarh Sahib, Punjab, India

Abstract

It is a common twentieth-century thought that we live in a world that is demystified by the force of technology and by the rationalized thinking that grounds such technology. In the wake of the attacks of September 11th, many artists struggled with how to respond to the horror. In literature, Don DeLillo was one of the first authors to pose a significant, fictionalized investigation of the day through *Falling Man*. DeLillo's works are very much suited to the uncertainties of the time. His list of awards is extensive: 'Don DeLillo is the acclaimed author of fifteen novels and three plays. He has won the National Book Award, the Jerusalem Prize, the *Irish Times* International Fiction Prize and most recently the PEN/Saul Bellow Award for lifetime achievement in American literature' (*Point Omega*). This paper aims at exploring the multiplicity of themes in DeLillo's fiction.

Key words: multiple themes, American literature, Don DeLillo, technology

Don DeLillo is one of the most celebrated contemporary American novelists. He is well known for his sharp social criticism of contemporary American life. Because of his works he has often been associated with Thomas Pynchon and William Gaddis. His works have covered subjects as diverse as television, nuclear war, sports, the complexities of language, performance art, the Cold War, mathematics, the advent of the digital age, and global terrorism.

His first novel, *Americana* (1971), depicts the odyssey of a television executive through the late 1960s America. DeLillo uses many stylistic techniques like fast-paced and fragmented presentations. He is also known for experimenting with the form and structure, and also for deemphasizing plot. DeLillo's *End Zone* (1972), in which a young man has two consuming passions for football and nuclear warfare, has gained him lot of attraction.

His next major success is *Ratner's Star* (1976), depicting a condition where verbal ideas cannot compete with the clarity and order of mathematics. It has been observed that in DeLillo's novels knowledge is not static but always fluctuating. *Players* (1977) and *Running Dog* (1978) focus on the

urban America with pawn-like characters, lost in a surreal nightmarish existence. *Amazons* (1980), discusses the first woman to play the National Hockey League. He wrote it under the pseudonym of Cleo Birdwell. *Players* and *Mao II*, present DeLillo's speculations on the terrorists and it provided a frame of reference from beginning to the process of post-9/11 world sometime before terrorist attacks in America. It was a fiction of prophetic nature. In 1982 came *The Names*, which continues to examine the language and accurate characterization of American cultural values.

DeLillo's *White Noise* (1985) published just weeks after the chemical spillage in Bhopal, was a commentary on the environmental disaster. *Libra* (1988) depicts the assassination of John F. Kennedy which inaugurated the era of media spectacle. DeLillo depicts Lee Harvey Oswald as the first truly postmodern figure, desiring his ten minutes of media fame. In 1991, DeLillo published *Mao II*, under the influenced of the events surrounding the fatwa placed upon the author Salman Rushdie, and the intrusion of the press into the life of the reclusive writer J. D. Salinger (Passaro).

Underworld (1997) is considered to be the most ambitious portrays the underground nuclear waste, the graffiti artist who lives and works in the New York subway system, the mafia underworld that is reported to have infiltrated the waste management industry, the desolate urban landscape of the Bronx with its population of underclass dwellers, and parts of the Cold War history.

Later he wrote *The Body Artist* (2001) and *Cosmopolis* (2003). His fourteenth novel, *Falling Man* (2007) describes a family's attempt to rebuild their lives in the dim weeks and months following the September 11 attacks. Instead of creating a documentary styled account, DeLillo charts impressionistically the complex psychological and existential rearrangements wrought by the attacks. His main characters are Keith and Lianne Neudecker, and their son, Justin. DeLillo published *Point Omega*, his fifteenth novel, in February 2010, dealing with an important theme. The 'Omega Point' of the title "... [is] the possible idea that human consciousness is reaching a point of exhaustion and that what comes next may be either a paroxysm or something enormously sublime and unenvisionable" (Alter).

It is not only the discussion of a variety of contemporary issues that we find in the writings of DeLillo, but a strong element of multiplicity of themes also. DeLillo has explored the idea of the increasing visibility and effectiveness of terrorists as societal actors in novels like *Players*, *Mao II*, and *Falling Man*. Another important theme in DeLillo's books is the saturation of mass media and its role in forming simulacra, resulting in the removal of an event from its context and the consequent draining of meaning. For instance, the highway shooter in *Underworld*, the televised disasters longed for in *White*

Noise, the planes in *Falling Man*, the evolving story of the interviewee in *Valparaiso*. He deals with the psychology of crowds and the capitulation of individuals to group identity in the prologue to *Underworld*, *Mao II*, and *Falling Man*. In a 1993 interview with Maria Nadotti, DeLillo explained:

My book (*Mao II*), in a way, is asking who is speaking to these people. Is it the writer who traditionally thought he could influence the imagination of his contemporaries or is it the totalitarian leader, the military man, the terrorist, those who are twisted by power and who seem capable of imposing their vision on the world, reducing the earth to a place of danger and anger. Things have changed a lot in recent years. One doesn't step onto an airplane in the same spirit as one did ten years ago: it's all different and this change has insinuated itself into our consciousness with the same force with which it insinuated itself into the visions of Beckett or Kafka.

Literary critic Harold Bloom named him as one of the four major American novelists of his time along with Thomas Pynchon, Philip Roth, and Cormac McCarthy. Few writers have been as effective at conveying the mood of ennui and menace that underlines the modern era. Alter argues, in an article, "Don DeLillo on Point Omega and His Writing Methods - WSJ.com," that for doing so DeLillo even marked a shift '... away from sweeping, era-defining novels such as *White Noise*, *Libra* and *Underworld* to a more "spare and oblique"' style.

DeLillo's writings are amalgamation of variety of genres. However, through *End Zone* (a sports novel), *Ratner's Star* (a science fiction), *Players* and *Running Dog* (thrillers), *White Noise* (an academic novel), we are conveyed DeLillo's suspicion, fear and frustration about American corporate capitalism. In *Players* and *Running Dog* he employs the thriller plot with an intention to portray the political reality of Post- Vietnam American politics and to critique the structuring of American identity.

In his most important novels, we find DeLillo exploring the fragmented kind of contemporary American personal identity in relation to social and cultural pulls. Moreover, there are glimpses of many crucial events and historical figures from the mid-twentieth century like assassination of President John F. Kennedy and Cold war. His critics have blended history and art giving it a form that Linda Hutcheon has termed as "Historiographic metafiction" (Duvall 3). Simultaneously, he explores the gaps and absences in the historical archive.

The three major novels in the writing career of DeLillo are *White Noise*, *Libra*, and *Underworld*. Television, apart from other themes of the portrayal of simulacra and representation of postmodern dehistoricised America, occupies a central position in *White Noise*, typifying the ways all media forms underscore the social imperative to consume. *Libra* gives a chance to reader to rethink about the events surrounding the assassination of President Kennedy. Here DeLillo tries to negotiate the two possibilities i.e. either accepting the official version of gunman story of Warren Commission Report or look for multiple possibilities of conspiracy theories. To explain the first possibility he provides the biography of Oswald and events leading to his involvement of government and anti-Castro agents to stage an act that would signal their displeasure to Kennedy in the wake of the failure of the US-backed invasion of Cuba.

Basically three main themes are prominent in *Underworld* i.e., the fate of a baseball from the winning game of the 1951 World Series, the threat of atomic warfare and the mountains of garbage created by modern society. DeLillo moves forwards and backwards through the decades, introducing characters and situations and gradually showing the way their lives are interconnected. Fittingly, most of the *Underworld* spoke extensively about the Cold War, the nuclear threat, the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the other great public news events. These events, however, are inextricably entwined with the everyday, the private and personal, so that a counter-reading of the text is possible. *Underworld* discusses a very important issue of wastage and garbage, especially the junk of the Cold war, with people's concerns about where and how to manage this waste.

There are many such examples in *the Underworld*, which depict in contemporary America the means of inspiring desire, along with the waste; a kind of wasted hyper reality. It questions how, as an individual and as a society, we should live in our time and with our past understanding, what to value and what to dispose of and also to face the consequences of the decision we have made.

It recreates the traumatic moment in Dallas, the "seven seconds that broke the backbone of the American century" (*Libra* 181). It is "a work of the imagination" based on the real life of Lee Harvey Oswald, the events surrounding America's 35th President, John F. Kennedy's assassination on 22nd Nov 1963 in Dealey Plaza in Dallas, and thereafter the murder of Oswald by Jack Ruby. *Libra* is also "a way of thinking about the assassination without being constrained by half-facts or overwhelmed by possibilities, by the tide of speculation that widen with the years" (*Libra* 458). The Kennedy assassination by Oswald is an event that has generated an astounding amount of conspiracy theories. Oswald died when on 24th Nov' 1963, he was being led through the basement of Dallas Police Headquarters to be transferred to the County Jail, when a Dallas club operator, Jack Ruby shot Oswald.

Libra 'is meant to suggest how uncertain "reality" becomes as a result of the media's penetration of life' (Douglas Keesey 10). Oswald killed Kennedy in anticipation of the attention he would receive from television and press. The role played by the media to cover these disturbing events makes us feel even more lost in violence and crime. During an interview with Anthony DeCurtis, DeLillo agrees that television was an essential part of the significance of the Kennedy assassination:

It's strange that the power of television was utilized to its fullest, perhaps for the first time, as it pertained to a violent event. Not only violent, but, of course, an extraordinarily significant event. This has become part of our consciousness. We've developed almost a sense of performance as it applies to televised events. And I think some of the people who are essential to such events... are simply carrying their performing selves out of the wings and into the theater. Such young men have a sense of the way in which their acts will be perceived by the rest of us, even as they commit the acts. So there is a deeply self-referential element in our lives that wasn't there before. (48-9)

Through his characters, DeLillo wants to present the contemporary American reality which has become completely mediated and artificial intrusion of the mass media, especially of TV and radio. These technological devices have turned reality into hyper reality. People have started feeling estranged from the real, and they seek refuge in the simulated. TV, with its glowing images and endless buzzes, intrudes in every aspect of human lives. The mass media have contributed to the emerging of the consumer culture. The delirium and the simulacrum of vast shopping malls and supermarkets have mesmerized the society. Such spaces create a virtual reality in which people have different perceptions of everything. As soon as they leave this hyper real place, they start feeling sad. People start to feel estranged from reality. Jack, one of DeLillo's characters after coming back from shopping says, "We went to our respective rooms, wishing to be alone" (DeLillo, 1985: 84). Deep down, people know that this sense of ecstasy and euphoria created by technology is short-lived, and soon after they are through with the delirium of TV, the cinema or the supermarket, they return to the real, which is, for them, dreadful.

Libra is about the influence and identification of the general public with the famous personalities. Oswald finds many coincidences of his and President Kennedy's life, like both had brothers named Robert, their wives got pregnant at the same time, and their military service in the Pacific. Sometimes he would force coincidences, as he did at the time of the shooting. Oswald believes

that the chance passing of Kennedy's motorcade below the window, where he works as the Texas School Book Depository in Dallas, must mean that he is destined to shoot the President. By shooting Kennedy, Oswald takes revenge against all the famous men whom he blames for confining him to small rooms or the life he had been living.

Libra also highlights the role of the media. After the assassination Oswald faces imprisonment. He is satisfied with the feeling that though his body is in prison, his name is carried by radio and TV stations across the world: "Everybody knew who he was now. This charged him with strength" (*Libra* 435). He feels proud as he has displaced media attention from the President himself, occupying Kennedy's place in the limelight.

John F. Kennedy is referred to as America's first "television president" in recognition of his skills of using media to get elected and become popular. President Kennedy himself once admitted, "We couldn't survive without TV" (*John Kennedy and the Media: The First Television President* 43). Moreover, it was the effect of media and its repeated replays of Kennedy's assassination, which incited Jack Ruby to assassinate Oswald: 'He [Ruby] anticipates for himself the star treatment which he will receive as Kennedy's avenger' (*Libra* 437).

In *Falling Man* the theme of memory moves through every page like a shadow, along with the unpredictable nature of luck and circumstance. Keith is haunted by the agonizing memories of a weekly poker game enjoyed by a group of men, not all of whom survived that grim day. Lianne works as a freelance editor and volunteers for a senior center, leading a journaling class for a group of newly diagnosed Alzheimer's patients. She cannot come to terms with her father's suicide, after receiving a similar diagnosis. Two persons (Keith and Florence) who worked in the towers meet when some personal items are recovered, and share a brief sexual relationship. They feel that only they can discuss the events of that day because nobody else would understand in a better way what they have borne. Eventually Keith starts visiting Las Vegas casinos assuming he can only feel comfortable in an impersonal world where luck and chance rule the day, and where players always lose.

The title of *Point Omega* (2010), his most recent and most compact novella, refers to the theologian Father Teilhard de Chardin's belief that there is a point of perfection that the universe will eventually achieve. In it, through Richard Elster, who was involved in the management of the country's war machine, depicts a lingering human mystery that haunts the landscape of desert and mind. DeLillo has chosen here to use the spare, etiolated, almost Beckettian prose he used in his 2001 novella, "The

Body Artist,” and his 1987 play, “The Day Room,” instead of the jazzy, vernacular, darkly humorous language he employed to such galvanic effect in “White Noise” and “Underworld.”

The central characters in this novel — Elster; Elster’s daughter, Jessie; and Finley, talk about how time feels different in the desert from the way it does in a city, and about life versus art and art versus reality. They also discuss about an “omega point” where “the mind transcends all direction inward” — whatever that might mean. These characters are alienated, oddly detached people. They are individuals dwelling in an indeterminate state, searching for something that might give order or meaning to their lives or simply shell-shocked by the randomness and menace of modern life.

DeLillo’s fiction has been weirdly prophetic about the twenty-first century. He has explored the most astonishing realities of the postmodern world. As discussed above, with the passage of time, DeLillo’s techniques have also been changing. He probes the areas which actually need attention in the postmodern society. Furthermore, his fiction is also a means to understand that even in the age of media and cyber links, artist do effect change and his art coincides with the Hutcheon’s belief that the postmodern novel can still enable social critique. He is of the view that although the media forms are mediations of the real but unfortunately and surprisingly are experienced as the real itself. We construct our perceptions more through what media presents. In other words, the representations become real.

These themes also exist outside their textual organization, and so their representations can be compared to other representations. The narrative techniques, real backgrounds, recurring figures, and thematic constructs in these texts form the strong basis for their contemporaries. Each selected work is an individualized attempt, at being coherent and varying in style. Don DeLillo, who rejoices in adding unexpected insertions into the even flow of time, unlikely juxtapositions of reality, and strange collisions of character and personality, shall be remembered both for his highly cinematic and hyper-textual style in portraying the crisis of contemporary America.

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